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The Importance of a clear understanding of Britain's Work in India

*An Inaugural Lecture
delivered before the University of Oxford
on November 4, 1920*

BY

SIR VERNEY LOVETT, K.C.S.I.

*Reader in Indian History in the
University of Oxford*

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The
Importance of a clear understanding
of Britain's Work in India

IT is a great honour that it should have fallen to me to lecture here on Britain's work in India. These are times when governments are anxious all the world over, and a month ago I received a letter from an Indian friend, two sentences of which ran : ' Things have been moving very fast here ; and the spirit of unrest which followed the war is showing no sign of abatement. It is difficult to know what a certain nation or country wants. Perhaps they do not know themselves.' India is not the only country which is suffering from vague unrest ; and in India Government is not alone in regarding the future with anxiety. I think I am right in saying that all sections of sober opinion there, British or Indian, share this anxiety. At such a time it is incumbent on us in England to make some effort to understand a complex situation and to learn what the problems before the Government of India really are. We can only do this if we make some study not only of India's present but of India's past. Since I returned to England I have sometimes read authoritative statements regarding our affairs in India, our prospects in India, our mistakes in India, which disposed in the easiest fashion of problems which are in fact extremely difficult. It was clear that the authors of these productions were largely ignorant

of the facts on which they pronounced judgement. I will endeavour in my lectures to stimulate acquaintance with facts and, at the very beginning, would deprecate a tendency, which is common enough, of fastening on some particular facts or incidents and declining to learn more. If we are judging of a man's life, we take it, or should take it, as a whole, even though it may have been marked by some actions which we deplore ; and if we wish to appreciate a nation's record throughout a difficult and remarkable phase of its history, we should adopt the same principle.

My course of lectures will be directed to elucidating the story of the rise, growth, and organization of the British power in India. But this organization has varied from time to time in order to keep pace with changing circumstances, increasing territories, political developments in India and in England. All endeavours to cast it in a mould which should endure were addressed to conditions which were bound to alter gradually from the natural operation of western currents of thought in eastern surroundings, and from a wonderful expansion of political ideas in Asia, due more to the achievements of Japan than to any other circumstance. There have, too, lately been additional forces operating in India. Since my predecessor Dean Hutton delivered his inaugural address, in January 1914, momentous and extraordinary events have occurred and produced extraordinary changes in the thoughts of many, both in India and in this country. Yet there, as here, certain basic principles of government can still only be disregarded with unhappy results. Moreover, the broad facts of India are still the same. In that great continent there is to-day an enormous population of divers races, religions, and languages, in various stages of intellectual

and moral growth, for the most part still absorbed in the customs, occupations, and beliefs of long centuries. There is still a land-frontier thousands of miles in length peopled by fierce, predatory, and warlike tribes. Beyond this are Asiatic countries more or less distracted by the aftermath of the war. In India there is still an enormous sea-board which requires protection. There are great resources which throughout the ages have attracted waves of invasion. There are western ideas seething among certain sections of highly complex communities, blending or conflicting with eastern ideas, and here and there penetrating beyond, in vague bewildering shape, to the illiterate gullible millions. When we talk of them we touch on the great problem which India has presented to British statesmanship, how to meet fully aspirations which our own history and traditions teach us to respect and favour, and at the same time to constitute a form of government in India which shall fit *all* the varying conditions of that huge continent. This problem has until quite lately been held, even by one great apostle of Liberalism, to present insuperable difficulties. But in 1917 the Gordian knot was cut. To respond to the Nationalist demand that government in India should conform to the fashion prevailing elsewhere within the British Empire, Parliament has launched India's hundreds of millions on a course which is designed to lead by definite stages of transition to a democratic parliamentary system. The way to this proclaimed goal will not be easy, for those who tread it will encounter institutions, ideas, and prejudices deeply rooted in the popular mind. They will, too, be hustled and disturbed by mischief-makers and impatient idealists, men who either wish things to go wrong or, in pursuit of abstract theories, discard all consideration of concrete

facts. Throughout these critical years order must be maintained, for without order real progress will be impracticable. India and her governors will need all the help, all the intelligent sympathy, that we can give them; and if we are to make our assistance effective we must both understand and be able to explain to others the history of India's past, the course of events that has led up to this present time.

The key-note of my predecessor's inaugural address was a remarkable saying of a great Viceroy; I will quote that saying with the whole inspiring passage in which it occurs. 'I am not', said Lord Curzon, 'one of those who think that we have built a mere fragile plank between the East and West which the roaring tides of Asia will presently sweep away. I do not think that our work is over or that it is drawing to an end. On the contrary, as the years roll by, the call seems to me more clear, the duty more imperative, the work more majestic, the goal more sublime. I believe that we have it in our power to weld the people of India to a unity greater than any they have hitherto dreamed of, and to give them blessings beyond any that they now enjoy. Let no one admit the craven fear that those who have won India cannot hold it, or that we have only made India to our own or to its unmaking. That is not the true reading of history. That is not my forecast of the future. To me the message is carved in granite—it is hewn out of the rock of doom—that our work is righteous and that it shall endure.' These words breathe a spirit of assurance that the interaction of the British and Indian peoples is good for both, that their interdependence is for all measurable time. There has been much in the history of the past six years to encourage this confidence, even though that history has its melancholy side. In news-

paper paragraphs the latter is prominent just now. It may be cheering if, avoiding discourse on controversial points, I briefly recite the main narrative.

The outbreak of the war was a supreme test of British work in India. Both foes and friends regarded it in this light. Our enemies had counted on catastrophe for us should such a crisis arise. An Indian revolutionary periodical, published in America, prophesied in November 1913 that when war broke out between Germany and England fortune would smile on nations now ruined by British oppression. The auspicious hour must not pass without a rising in India. On March 6, 1914, the *Berliner Tageblatt* published an article on 'England's Indian trouble', predicting that the day of reckoning for England would come far sooner than official negligence supposed. The writer took the gloomiest possible view of our position in India, where, he said, secret societies of revolutionaries were being assisted from outside. Our own official forecast was of a different complexion and was justified by events, although it hardly visualized the vivid enthusiasm of the early days of that wonderful time or the prolonged and searching character of the subsequent strain. Some of you may have seen a very interesting book, Mr. William Archer's *India and the Future*. Readers thereof know that, after much travelling and investigation, the author placed this book in the hands of his literary agent on August 4, 1914. In view, however, of the great event of that momentous day, he decided not to publish until the end of the war. But when the war showed no signs of ending in May 1917, he gave his book to the public just as it was, frankly confessing that in uttering the prediction, 'the moment England gets into serious trouble elsewhere, India in her present temper would

burst into a blaze of rebellion', he had been mistaken. In fact, when the war began, India, as we all know, showed remarkable loyalty to Great Britain. I need not describe the activities of certain bands of revolutionaries, for these were met and thwarted by the good will of the people at large guided by the foresight and determined energy of some faithful and courageous servants of the Crown. I prefer rather to dwell on the general spirit, which needs to be remembered just now, when we frequently read in the papers saddening paragraphs about affairs in India. I prefer to tell you of such incidents as the following.

In September 1914 the non-official members of the Imperial Legislative Council passed with one voice a resolution of 'unswerving loyalty and enthusiastic devotion to their King-Emperor, as well as of unflinching support to the British Government'. They asked to be allowed to share in the financial burdens of the war. 'We know', said a prominent Hindu member, 'that our present condition is due to the peace we have enjoyed under British rule, that our very existence depends on the continuance of that rule. We cannot, on this occasion, be mere onlookers. Along with our devotion and sympathy the general idea is to make any *contribution that may be required of us*.' On February 24, 1915, a resolution was passed with acclamation, a resolution of 'gratitude, devotion, and loyalty to His Majesty the King', gratitude attracted by his 'personal attention to Indian soldiers in the theatre of war and in hospitals'. Moreover, while at the headquarters of the Government the attitude of public men refreshed the hearts of all servants of the Crown, in many far-away villages, as I myself saw, the demeanour of the people had never been more

friendly. I remember a visit from an old pensioned soldier who came to see me in my tent when our prospects in Europe were far from bright, and said that he was grieved to hear that the struggle was going against us. Was this true? he asked in a voice broken by emotion. Were things really not well with the Sarkar?

I need only mention the gallant behaviour of Indian troops on many battle-fields, the financial contributions, the untiring efforts of government servants of all classes which combined with public response to produce results in the shape of labour, munitions, food-stuffs, manufactured goods, railway transport, and other supplies, which surpassed all expectations. I will sum up by saying that for long after the beginning of the war a common purpose united the majority of thinking men of all races in India as nothing else till then had ever united them. Their imagination was stirred. They realized more or less clearly their citizenship in a great Empire fighting on the right side in the mightiest war that was ever fought in this world.

But the war lasted too long. The Irish rebellion of 1916, other events and influences, encouraged agitation and stimulated impatience among the political classes. A growing current of disturbance was stemmed in some measure by the Declaration of August 20, 1917, which promised responsible parliamentary government to be reached by measured stages. Then came the visit of the Secretary of State, the numerous addresses and general stir, and, later, the issue of the Reforms Report. No constitutional Reforms can be achieved without a rise of temperature, especially when they involve, as these Reforms did involve, large racial issues. Twice in India have I witnessed the incubation of Reforms. On the first occasion tempers were inclined

to rise; and on the second occasion, where all parties considered that much was at stake, tempers rose very considerably. If any one of my audience aspires to reform a constitution in circumstances at all similar to circumstances in India, let him note that if 'the way of the transgressors is hard', the way of the reformers is even harder. The problems were most difficult in any case; and while vigorous and often heated discussions were still proceeding, the situation was overshadowed by deeply tragic events and their consequences. The latter are apparently active still. Those who wish to exploit them are hard at work. Their efforts have in some measure failed; but we must await further developments.

Two questions of a general nature irresistibly suggest themselves. The first is, why did so many people err widely in forecasting the attitude of India on the outbreak of a great European war? The answer is plain. They were misled by anti-British effusions on platforms and in the press, in India and in other countries. Mr. Gladstone once spoke of two journals which had never found, so far as he was aware, 'anything but guilt or folly' in any one of his actions. Such prejudiced and indiscriminating criticism is checked and met in this country. It is generally taken for what it is worth. But in India conditions are widely different; there is no rival political party to oppose actively the 'outs' who ascribe all ills to the guilt or folly of the 'ins'. There is a sober informed opinion, but it often fears greatly the energetic tactics of the party of perpetual discontent. Outside both parties is the great bulk of the people who for centuries have accepted one government after another, looking to each government to defend its own reputation and fight its foes of all kinds. The British Govern-

ment has known how to meet its enemies in the field, but has found its enemies in the press more difficult to combat. Contrary to frequently received opinion, it has submitted to be constantly slandered and maligned, trusting to facts for vindication, retaliating now and then when palpably serious mischief has occurred or is imminent. Before the war and throughout its course wild statements and outpourings combined with propaganda in other countries to produce an impression which did injustice to the real views of the general Indian public. In spite of all that had been said and written to our discredit, when the war broke out the people generally decided that, whatever its defects and omissions might be, the British Government had deserved well of India. With few exceptions they turned to it instinctively, confounding alike the calculations of its foes and the apprehensions of some of its friends.

Then you will ask—what of the downward curve since that first period of the war? Are the high lights now behind? On what foundations can we base our hopes for the future?

To discuss the downward curve would be to plunge into controversial subjects. Leaving it therefore behind, I will say that we may found our hopes for the future on deep-seated Indian loyalty to His Majesty the King-Emperor, on memories of a past which goes back far beyond all recent troubles, on the prospective entry into politics of the landed classes, on the generally sensible and orderly character of the people, and on a consciousness of need on their side and on ours. Whatever dangers, too, the time of transition may entail, it certainly will give ample scope for the development of reasoning patriotism, for solid and notable Indian service to India. It will invest ministers chosen from

popular assemblies with grave, separate, indefeasible responsibility. It will thus tend to instil practical appreciation of difficulties of administration which are in fact thoroughly solid. The British servants of the Crown, too, should now know where they are. They have a definite policy to carry out. There should be no more of those injurious oscillations which result from a vague or uncertain mandate at the seat of supreme power. There is no longer before men in India the 'haunting question', once put by a Viceroy, 'Whither are we leading all these millions, what is it all to come to, where is the goal?' A goal which, we have often been assured by the political classes, will satisfy all their cravings for self-respect, has been accepted by the Imperial Parliament, and a step of a definite and solid a kind as was at all consonant with any sense of responsibility has been taken towards it. The salient fact of the present is put in the words of Lord Sinha, 'A bridge has been provided whereby Indians may pass from an autocratic and bureaucratic form of government, which guides her destinies *ab extra*, to a form of government whereby she will control her own destinies'. The bridge seems to some over-cautiously constructed. Such persons hardly realize some marked features of the situation.

Genuine progress toward successful parliamentary government in India is conditional on a great educational and industrial advance. Chapter IV of the official Report on the progress and condition of India during the year 1917-18 shows clearly and concisely how secondary education, which is now largely of a purely literary type, has been so far almost monopolized by one class of a community of many millions. It also shows that although that class pursues learning with en-

thusiasm, the masses of the people are illiterate without any marked desire to change their conditions, but with strong ideas regarding increases of taxation. Yet it is impossible that there should be a great extension of education without very considerable pecuniary outlay. Under the coming dispensation it will fall on popular ministers, who will naturally be reluctant to face fresh taxation, to solve the difficult problems which the educational situation presents. They will appreciate these problems vividly, for they are to be chosen because they are men who possess the confidence of the Councils to which they belong and can lead those bodies effectively. It is manifest that if their leadership is to be successful, beneficial, and deserving of extension of functions, it must be supported by educated and well-informed opinion.

Progress toward a sound parliamentary system is also largely dependent on industrial advance: India is rich in raw materials and possibilities, but poor in manufacturing accomplishment. She relies in great measure on outside sources for supervisors and foremen. Her stores of money are largely inert. A wide extension of commercial and industrial employment is needed by her middle or professional classes. The Government has made a great effort to seize the present opportunity. A very strong committee has fully investigated the whole subject of Indian industries, and has prepared a most instructive report abounding in useful proposals. Every effort is being made to carry out these proposals; but unfortunately an epidemic of strikes seems to threaten a fair prospect. We may earnestly hope that this epidemic will pass, but mischievous efforts are being made to prolong it.

I think I have said enough to show that the bridge

from the present to the future India required careful building. I might have said more; but the particular bridge which was devised and has been constructed is now ready and waiting to be opened. Its strong and weak parts will be demonstrated; its workmanship will be tested by practical experience. We may earnestly hope that it will bear the test well and thus reward the infinite labours of the builders. Just now we read of attempts to wreck it before it comes into use by methods selected with suicidal and malignant care. Few in England realize the disgust which these efforts excite in many Indians who understand fully all that is at stake, but are unwilling to encounter newspaper abuse. There are, of course, others who are like-minded and less timorous, but perhaps hardly realize the strenuous efforts that the occasion demands of them.

I read the other day a report of a speech by the Viceroy who before long is laying down his heavy burden. Lord Chelmsford expressed confidence that as the foundations of the new constitution settled, old quarrels would wear away and malignant attacks on the Government would spend themselves in vain. He has faith in the Reforms of which he is part-author, and while he recognizes the perils of the present and the future, he believes that the officers of Government will overcome all the difficulties which they will encounter. Into the length and breadth of our history in India are built the lives and labours of many of these officers, *British and Indian*. Who that knows and realizes all that they have done can believe that it will not bear good fruit through all the coming years? Perhaps I may say a word about our own countrymen who with loyal Indian support are now bearing the burden and heat of the day. By the cause which they

serve little known, they are giving their best to India and their best to England. They are the men who will have to face the labours of the future. I am thinking particularly of the workers in the plains who through many a long Indian day apply to real concrete conditions whatever marching orders they receive. They do the spade-work. They deal directly with all the sections of an enormous population, with all the congeries of people, marching, as Lord Morley said, in uneven stages through all the centuries from the fifth to the twentieth. A distinguished Viceroy remarked that they reminded him of the stokers in the engine-room of a man-of-war. 'There they are,' he added, 'stoking the furnaces while the great ship is being manœuvred and the big guns are thundering overhead. Sometimes they go down with the vessel without ever having seen the battle and the fighting; but if their commander wins the victory up they come, begrimed with smoke, to take their share in the rejoicing.' 'These', he said, 'are the real organizers of victory.' These, I may add, will face with a stout heart whatever obstacles lie before them. But they will need support and sympathy from home. If they get it here they will get it from India. What can we do to help them and their Indian coadjutors? Here, in England, is the key of their position. Here, too, is the key of the position of all patriotic Indians who desire the orderly progress of their country toward the appointed goal. Let us realize these facts.

Affairs in India deserve our keenest interest. But we shall not be able to follow them or to assist all who in these arduous times seek to build truly for the future there, if we make no effort to gain some knowledge of the history of the past. I need not emphasize the interest of this history to those among you who are

either Indian or are going to India. But we may note that some of the greatest British administrators of the past have loved India, have found India well worth serving. On the last day of his life Warren Hastings wrote to an intimate friend that his latest prayers would be for the service of his beloved country and for India, for which, he wrote, 'I feel a sentiment in my departing hours, not alien from that which is due from every subject to his own'. But what had been his portion in and from the country? Read his letters to his wife, the long story of his efforts and troubles, the protracted worry and anxiety of his impeachment. Yet his latest thought was for India, the people of India, his own countrymen in India. There was something about India and Indian service that made it all worth while.

Wherein does the charm of India consist? Does it lie in the glorious mountains, the broad rivers, the splendid forests and their varied inhabitants, the vast stretching plains, at one season brown and bare, at another fresh and green? Is it in the wonderful mixture of races, religions, and languages, the broad human interest of the whole, the varied life of the towns, the friendly country-side? Is it in the ancient cities? Is it in the memorials of teachers and rulers of old times or in calling to mind the labours and achievements of our own fathers in the country? Is it in recollections of absorbing work, of happy associations and valued companions? Those who have felt the charm of India seldom analyse their feeling. But it is one which dwells in the heart though it is difficult to explain with the tongue.

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